

Seeing the Forest for the Trees: Identity, Language and Revolutionary Waves

Katz, Mark N. *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves*. New York: St. Martin's, 1999.

Munck, Ronaldo, and Purnaka L. de Silva, eds. *Postmodern Insurgencies: Political Violence, Identity Formation and Peacemaking in Comparative Perspective*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000.

Knezys, Stasys, and Romanas Sedlickas. *The War in Chechnya*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1999.

Perhaps the most difficult task facing the writer on political violence is the scope of his or her work. If a book is too theoretical, the main arguments may oversimplify the complex problems underpinning a conflict. By the same token, works focusing on a specific conflict run the risk of being unable to see the forest beyond the trees. Mark Katz's *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves* is the most theoretical of the three works reviewed. The author puts forward a theory of "revolutionary waves" and examines the most recent wave in the international system: that of Islamic fundamentalism. Many of the authors in *Postmodern Insurgencies* would not agree with Katz's conclusions; the only way to understand conflict is by deconstructing it and its language. No theory can possibly account for the multiplicity of factors that comprise an insurgency. Finally, in *The War in Chechnya*, theoretical concerns are of little interest to Stasys Knezys and Romanas Sedlickas as they attempt to reconstruct the events of the 1994-96 struggle between Russians and Chechens.

The current edition of *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves*, a softcover reissue of the 1997 original edition, is a logical progression from Mark Katz's other works. A professor at George Mason University, Katz has published previously on various aspects of revolutions, Soviet military and foreign policy, and the Middle East. In a very crisp style, Katz draws from his previous works to develop a parsimonious theme. The twentieth century, he argues, has seen a number of revolutionary waves, including Marxism-Leninism and Arab nationalism. Much like empires, revolutionary waves dissipate over time. Revolutionary waves not only fail, but all non-democratic revolutions fail for many of the same reasons. The Islamic fundamentalist wave will ebb too, as it shares traits that led to the downfall of Marxist-Leninist and Arab nationalist waves.

In order to better understand why the Islamic fundamentalist wave will recede, Katz examines three aspects of revolutionary waves: the relationship between the nascent revolutionary wave and aspiring revolutions; the relationship between the established revolutionary wave and affiliated revolutions; and, the reasons why revolutionary waves ultimately collapse. Although lucidly argued, the book suffers from the same flaws that plague similar works, such as Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order*. Any theory worthy of merit describes patterns and shared traits; yet the devil is almost always in the practical details. Katz has the honesty to admit

when he is unsure of the details. For example, he suggests on p. 46 that "It seems highly likely that various Islamic fundamentalist revolutionary groups, such as those in Tajikistan, have been disappointed over the low level of military assistance they have received from Iran" and on the following page "Precisely why [the Filipino NPA and the Peruvian Sendero Luminoso] chose to be Maoist is unclear."

Postmodern Insurgencies takes an approach entirely different from that of *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves*. A collection of chapters by political scientists, sociologists and even former practitioners, *Postmodern Insurgencies* is concerned with identity rather than ideology. The broad theme underpinning the work is that insurgencies can only be understood in their specific context; attempts at broader extrapolation only muddy the scholastic waters. Beyond the need to deconstruct conflict, Ronaldo Munck sees the need to understand the political identities of the insurgents: "We take seriously the motivation of those engaged in political violence, rather than dismiss them as psychopaths and thereby end up not contributing to any clarity of understanding and relevance of ensuing political interventions." (p. 8) The culture of fear is in need of deconstruction too: "One precondition is to take the political aspirations of the insurgent movement seriously." (p. 11)

The other chapters in *Postmodern Insurgencies* deal with a range of subjects, including changing political identity as part of post-conflict reconstruction and demobilization of insurgent forces in El Salvador (Gerald Munck and Dexter Boniface), Northern Ireland (Ronaldo Munck), South Africa (Alan Emery and Rupert Taylor), Ethiopia (Aregawi Berhe) and Somalia (Abdullah Mohamoud). Issues and alternative options are discussed for the on-going conflicts in chapters on Sri Lanka (Purnaka de Silva) and the Palestinian Authority (Mouin Rabbani). Mar'a Matilde Ollier Honor Fagan calls for "Engendering Conflict in Post-Structuralist Perspective." Azza Karam takes issue with the central premise of works like *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves* by suggesting that there is not one Islam, but the many Islamisms that are often equated equally with terrorism.

Postmodern Insurgencies succeeds as an interdisciplinary exploration of drawing attention to the importance of identity in insurgencies; the messages being conveyed, however, are often drowned in the muddled "deconstructed discourse" that seeks to move beyond "language . . . as a simple instrument of communication." (p. 2) Consider, for example, the following prose and the message it attempts to convey:

Hence postmodernism, in the context of global culture, is seen in terms of a symptom and a powerful cultural image of the move away from conceptualisations of global culture as simply homogenising processes (for example, 'Macdonaldisation') towards an understanding of the diversity and hybridity of local discourses, codes and practices, or, in Robertson's terms, a situation where particularity is a global value and what is taking place is the 'universalization of particularism.' (p. 226)

If "language takes on meaning and discourses are constructed through struggle" (p. 2), then this reviewer has constructed a whole new discourse given the struggle with the language and awkward prose contained in *Postmodern Insurgencies*.

Language plays an even more significant role in Knezys' and Sedlickas' *The War in Chechnya*, especially in the latter portion of the book. This reflects, in part, issues raised in *Postmodern Insurgencies*. Language is more than communication; in an insurgency, public opinion equals support. Both insurgent and counter-insurgent seek to sway public opinion through the use of language, in order to gain public support while simultaneously denying the same support to their adversary. Knezys and Sedlickas make special note in the concluding chapter of the use of language by the Russian media, including the terms "war" or "special operation to reestablish constitutional order and the rule of law."

The War in Chechnya is the eighth volume in the Texas A&M University Press Eastern European Series and the latest in a number of books on Chechnya, but it differs from previous volumes on the subject in its purpose. The authors, both Lithuanians, examine the war for the lessons that small, East European countries can learn should they have to fight against a much larger power (read Russia). They devote one chapter to Chechen arrangements to defend the country after the declaration of independence, several chapters to warfare in various types of terrain (flatlands, mountains, urban terrain) and the switch from asymmetric battle using terrain to the asymmetric warfare of guerrilla tactics and terrorist raids. The work is organized around what the authors view as the three periods of the 1994-96 war: the first period starting with the planning of Russian military operations in August 1994 and ending with the hostage siege at Budionovsk that ended in June 1995; the second period beginning with peace negotiations in June 1995 and concluding with the Chechen attempt to disrupt the Russian elections in December 1995; and, the third period initiated by hostage takings in Dagestan in January 1996 and ending with Dzhochar Dudujev's assassination three months later. An interesting historical footnote, which is given a full chapter in *The War in Chechnya*, discusses the conflicting reports of Dudujev's death and his role as a symbol to the Chechen people.

Military officers and think tank analysts will find much of interest in *The War in Chechnya*; the book is lavish in operational detail of both the planning and conduct of military actions by each side. The unwary reader should be warned, however, that the authors have a decidedly pro-Chechen bias to their work. One clue is the translation, after the series editor's statement, of the Chechen national anthem. In reading the accounts of actions, there is nobility ascribed to Chechen resourcefulness and defense against overwhelming odds. The barely concealed admiration for the Chechens is contrasted against the malevolent, disproportionate, yet simultaneously incompetent Russian use of force. This aside, *The War in Chechnya* is a welcome addition to the literature on the subject.

At the polar opposite of the praxis of *The War in Chechnya*, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves* is an excellent attempt at a wide-ranging theory to explain why revolutionary ideologies come and go. Its minor flaws notwithstanding, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves* should have broad appeal as a reader for a course on revolutionary theory or irregular warfare, due in part to its clear argument, concise style and price (in paperback). *Postmodern Insurgencies* contains a handful of useful, case-specific chapters on an aspect of irregular conflict that has received little attention outside academic circles. It is doubtful, however, that identity formation will garner more attention if works

on the subject continue to be written mostly in impenetrable, torturous prose and priced at the level of library acquisitions.

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